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ABSTRACT

Addressing the issue of testing and evaluation in English at the university level, this paper focuses on the development and use of the English Placement Test developed by the California State University system. The discussion of this testing program is placed within a framework of four testing principles: testing is an essential part of learning and is necessary for effective teaching: tests in English should examine directly and reinforce meaningful writing and reading skills: it is important to know who wields the testing power, and how responsibly: and the use made of test results should be carefully investigated. The discussion includes information about two major proficiency tests given at the secondary level: public higher education in California: the history of testing in English at the university level in that state: the creation of the test development committee, whose job was to develop a systemwide test to be required of all entering college freshmen: the components of the test: and the use made of test results. The paper concludes that the testing program has been successful and has gained faculty approval throughout the state university system. (FL)

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TESTING AND EVALUATION IN CALIFORNIA

By Edward M. White

A paper presented to the Modern Language Association Convention on December 27, 1979.

Giving a talk on this topic to this audience makes me feel like Barbara Hutton's sixth husband: I know exactly what I'm supposed to do, but I just don't have the faintest idea of how to make it interesting.

The major problem in talking about testing is that the subject is on the one hand enormously important--particularly important to teachers--and on the other hand is so intrinsically boring that it's hard to stay awake while you're talking about it, not to speak of while you're listening to it. I hope the importance of the subject will defeat its inherent dullness for all of us.

What I propose to do is to state four principles for testing, which will serve as a conceptual frame for my remarks, then briefly summarize some of the more important testing programs in California public education, then conclude with a discussion of the most ambitious and innovative testing program going on in higher education in the state of California--that is, the California State University English Placement Test.

Four Principles For Testing in English

1. The principal issue in English testing has been and continues to be the degree to which it is in fact responsive to and informed by the discipline. That is, since English is essentially concerned with reading and with writing, tests in the field should examine directly and reinforce meaningful reading and writing ability.

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2. Testing is an essential part of learning, and necessary for effective teaching. Certainly every writer and writing teacher knows that evaluation is what moves a first draft into a later draft. We cannot learn without finding out how we are doing. Thus, while improper, invalid, or unreliable testing deserve condemnation or ridicule, there is no place among professionals for irresponsible or uninformed attacks upon all testing.

3. Since testing represents substantial political, economic, and educational power, it is very important to discover who is wielding that power and how responsibly.

4. Finally, we need to inquire into the use of test results. That is, test results should be used as part of the learning process to help students and to support a curriculum, not used to create failures and to invoke punishments upon those who do not happen to fit the demands of the test.

California Secondary School Testing

I'm going to spend only a very few moments on the secondary schools, even though many of our problems at the college level are even more severe there. It does not do to spend too much time on so depressing a subject. In California, testing in the secondary school goes on constantly, but there are only two programs which I would like to mention in this context. The first of these is the California high school proficiency examination. This is a test developed by the California State Department of Education which is equivalent in many ways to the GED for adults. That is, high school students in their sophomore year, or later, who want to

examine out of high school, may take this particular examination; if they pass, they receive a certificate equivalent to the high school diploma and are legally admissible to community college. Since the program began in 1975, about 30,000 students a year have been taking the test, with a stable pass rate of about 42%. This means that relatively few students are taking advantage of this option, though it is an opportunity for students who for various reasons want to get out of high school and move on either into work or into the community college. The test does include some writing, and examines some reading, but it focuses wholly upon what are quaintly called "survival skills"--those minimal basic skills which were most appropriately described two decades ago by R. P. Blackmur as the minimal amounts of reading and writing skill for a population to be effectively controlled.

The second high school testing program that will be of interest to you is the proficiency testing requirement now being implemented in all California high school districts, as indeed in districts in states all over the country. Beginning next year at the latest, high school students in the state of California will need to pass proficiency tests in reading, writing and compufation in order to receive a high school diploma. Each of these tests must be devised or selected by each individual school district. Now, required proficiency testing of this sort has come to be the public's way of demanding higher standards in the schools, but, for reasons I implied in my opening list of assertions about testing, such a goal is only rarely the result.

There are some school districts in the state of California which have already begun using the proficiency testing requirement in a genuine effort to improve education. They do this by involving the teachers very heavily in the creation of the tests and using the

information provided by the tests in order to better suit the curriculum to the students' development and needs. In such districts, the teachers in the classroom tend to feel they "own" the tests and, often with outside help, they are developing very respectable testing instruments. There is a very short honor role of such school districts, including Los Angeles Unified, Huntington Beach, and Laguna Beach.

But in most cases, proficiency testing has not led to better education. The issue becomes political very quickly. If the tests ask for any kind of reading and writing skill above the most rudimentary, utilitarian, and functional, very many students fail. Massive failure leads to an all-out search for scapegoats, instant solutions, and escape routes around the test. Thus, proficiency testing is not turning out to be the answer to low standards of high school education. Rather, low standards in education are demanding very low standards in most proficiency testing. As usual, minimum standards become maximum demands, and the best of intentions without sound principles yield negative results.

California Public Higher Education and the CSUC English Placement Test

California public higher education consists of three segments. The top level (for funding and admissions standards) is the University of California, which has 9 campuses and approximately 100,000 students. The admission requirements are such as to select from the top 12 1/2% of high school graduates. The second tier is the California State University and Colleges (CSUC), the system in which I teach. That huge system has 19 campuses, over 300,000 students and an admission system which presumably limits enrollment to the top 33 1/3% of high school graduates. The size of the system is such that the CSUC offers 5% of the bachelor's degrees in the

country, and 3% of all masters degrees. The third segment of public higher education consists of the community colleges, open-door institutions, approximately 110 of which exist in all corners of the state, with enrollments over one million.

I will not say here anything about English testing at either the community colleges or the University of California, since I know of no large-scale innovations in these segments. I will spend the rest of my time describing the development and use of the English Placement Test developed by the California State University--the CSUC/EPT--since that test has shown that the set of principles with which I opened this talk can inform a large-scale operation with imposing technical requirements.

I should also say that what follows is adapted from an article that will appear in the first issue of the exciting new journal edited by Ken Bruffee at Brooklyn College, The Writing Program Administrators Journal, to appear in March of 1980.

The major experiment in English testing in California has been at the State University level, where the benefits of local college testing have been combined with the benefits of large scale testing. That is, the CSUC EPT combines the validity and reliability that become possible when large amounts of funds and large-scale data become available with the faculty control necessary for wise campus use with students. The EPT, in fact, emerged out of a felt--and expressed--need for placement testing by the CSUC English faculties. In 1974, a meeting of English chairs and composition directors (the CSUC English Council) resolved to request such a test at the system level.

The argument for a systemwide test, rather than local devices, depended upon the recent experiment in testing sponsored by the English faculties of the system: the English Equivalency Examination (EEE). (See the Journal of Basic Writing, I, Spring/Summer 1978, 18-38, for a description of this credit by examination program.) The EEE had shown that state funding could be gained for responsible large-scale testing without loss of faculty control. With experience and knowledge of sophisticated testing (both multiple choice and essay) came an awareness of the cost and complexity involved; again, systemwide testing offered the possibility for the scope and quality of testing that was needed.

It took almost two years before that call for a test led to the creation of a test development committee. But by the time that faculty committee began meeting in the fall of 1976, it was facing a tight deadline; its product was to be required of all entering freshmen the following year. Happily, the Educational Testing Service had been awarded a contract as test consultant firm, and gave the EPT top priority as well as substantial developmental funding. The committee worked feverishly and the new test was developed and administered to entering freshmen in 1977; it has since become a regular part of the State University program, with over 50,000 tests now administered.

Systemwide administration of the test has tried to refrain from intruding into matters individual campuses can do best, i.e., counseling students into appropriate curricula, developing courses and programs, etc. But system officals have been moderately successful at gaining state funding for local initiative in these areas, and

at resisting pressures to take such misguided actions as establishing a statewide cutting score. The principal advantage of so large-scale an operation has been to gain the resources to put together a creative and effective new examination, using the best knowledge and experience of CSUC faculty and ETS test specialists.

The Test Development Committee, chaired by Professor Rex Burbank, San Jose State University, tried to take advantage of the opportunity to produce a new test, and to introduce some new concepts into large scale English testing. For example, the EPT includes a forty-five minute essay portion (whose statistical importance is starting to emerge with startling clarity from follow-up studies). The committee was able to discard the usage and error-hunting orientation of traditional "objective" English tests for multiple-choice portions on reading, sentence construction, and logic and organization which view the student as writer rather than editor. The deep suspicion most of us have felt at the effect of error-hunting usage tests on racial minorities led the committee to avoid trivialities or non-significant dialect issues, and to focus on matters of real consequence to writing. (Again, follow-up studies show the EPT distributes minorities in a markedly different, and apparently far more normal, way than the College Board Test of Standard Written English, the most widely used placement test based on usage. An article now in the final stages of preparation will

give details about these findings. It contains score distributions showing that the asserted high correlation of usage and writing scores does not hold for racial-ethnic minorities. I have with me some charts from that article which I will be happy to show to and discuss with those interested after this session.)

Each campus in the system uses the test results in a different way--which is appropriate for a system that prides itself on differences in purpose and function. Most use the total score, derived from the four sections of the test, to identify a level below which some sort of remedial/developmental work is recommended or required. Smaller campuses seem to have an easier time requiring such work, though a few large campuses are beginning to do so. Only a few campuses seem to be setting up old style "bonehead" classes, and even these are breaking tradition by giving these classes to their most experienced and qualified faculty. Some campuses are using the test results, and the new funding for low-scoring students, to establish or improve tutorial support in classes or learning centers. The Dominguez Hills campus, for example, does not group students by test score, as most of the rest do, but requires additional tutorial work for low scoring students who remain in regular freshman composition classes.

While no one with a sense of history could claim that this renewed attention to weak student writers is unprecedented, or wholly free from economic motivation, some facets of what is

happening do represent new professional developments. At least for the present, many of those teaching the remedial/developmental courses seem to share high morale and a sense of important mission. Some serious research is going on, as part of the national effort to discover new knowledge about writing instruction. There are indications that promotion and tenure committees are taking note of professional activity in this area as work that counts. Most significant of all is the agreement by 19 campuses, particularly 19 English departments, to accept responsibility for the development and use of a single placement test.

This represents a major commitment to the education of the untraditional student, often the badly prepared student, very often the economically and socially deprived student. It is, of course, too early to say whether these developments are permanent changes in departmental policy and goals, or a temporary response to the social and economic pressures of the times.

The EPT has made some important contributions to English teaching statewide. One technical advantage it offers is to establish base line data for research, for relations with schools, for campus graduation requirements, and for funding. The EPT data led directly to new enrichment formulas for "remedial" instruction from the state. Two campuses in the system (San Bernardino and Fresno) have received major grants from NEH to teach writing across the curriculum and, while the link to the EPT is unclear, there have

been suggestions that the existence of the test has helped both programs.

No one should imagine that so large a program in so large a system could be developed either painlessly or without continuing problems. Funding, which appeared to be the greatest difficulty, has turned out not to be much of a problem. Once the program was launched, the California legislature, despite Proposition 13, came through with the required money. However, campus clerical workers in testing and admissions offices, who needed to create or adapt notification systems, resisted the added workload. This bureaucratic problem, a kind of brute office inertia, will apparently take years to solve; until these systems work smoothly, inefficiencies of various kinds bedevil the program. Linked to this problem is a real difficulty in timing: to achieve reliable essay scores and test security, statewide test dates and controlled grading sessions are necessary; but each campus requires test information at a different time. These and other bureaucratic headaches will be dealt with as the program matures, but they still diminish its effect, particularly on some campuses where a weak English department has little influence.

Finally, the widespread participation in testing on the part of English faculty, and administrators has had a generally salutory result. To gain direct control over testing and the data it produces is to gain substantial new power, available for use in many ways. The implications of this power for staffing and funding of writing programs are just becoming clear. But some uses of this power are obvious.

Training programs for inexperienced teachers, whether traditional graduate students or newly-designated colleagues from history or physical education departments, gain new strength from informed evaluation components. Thus, an informed discussion of essay testing requires considerable attention to such matters as the design of writing assignments, the ability to clarify quality distinctions for students, the need to notice and reward what students have done well, the desirability of checking individual judgements against those of one's colleagues, etc. There are even some tendencies toward that most sensible, and most threatening of traditional innovations, staff grading of final examinations.

For better or for worse, probably for better, each of our campuses is now required to certify the writing proficiency of its graduates. While in general campus-wide committees have been developing and overseeing these certification programs, it is the English department that usually sees to it that the plan is carried out. Again, knowledge of and control over testing has led to important curricular developments in writing at the upper division level, with important benefits to both the university and the English department. Several campuses now require advanced composition classes, either in the English department or in other divisions of the university, normally under campus committee control, and writing program administrator direction. On all campuses, the renewed emphasis upon writing as necessary for the BA has moved English departments, with their real or reputed expertness in the area, back towards the center of the curriculum; this emphasis is also a healthy force in opposition to the new vocationalism. The degree

of real expertness the English department can bring to these graduation certification issues will certainly influence the effectiveness and liberal values of the upper division writing program.

The CSUC English Placement Test, despite some inefficiencies, has thus brought reliable new information and potential new power to writing programs in the California State University system. The EPT has had considerable national impact as well; its multiple-choice portion has been repackaged by the College Board as a major part of the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills, it formed the basis of the English part of the New Jersey Basic Skills program, and its influence is just beginning to be felt in some other states. Its power is, I propose, based on its recognition of the four principles I stated to begin this talk. Success of such testing programs must depend on the degree of real control and felt ownership by English faculties, the test's responsiveness to reading and writing above the merely utilitarian level, and the real usefulness to education beyond mere classification of students. When successful, such testing programs offer important advantages to the institutions, their faculties, and their students.

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